

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release November 18, 1979

Joy Davis 202/343-5634

SOUTHBOUND WHOOPING CRANE SIGNALS BIOLOGISTS EN ROUTE

When a four-month old whooping crane named Ray set course for his first migration south from Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Idaho, last month, his departure did not go unnoticed.

"Ray" was beaming electronic signals to a receiving unit in a small airplane tracking the young whooper via an experimental two-ounce radio transmitter attached to the bird's leg.

The radio tracking--being used for the first time on whooping cranes--was undertaken to help biologists learn more about the behavior of these birds during migration. Records show that substantial numbers of juvenile birds are lost during these long flights, but little is known about the effects of accidents, human disturbance, or habitat use on the birds while they are en route. The radio tracking is intended to yield such information to help assure the gradual comeback of a species that once stood on the brink of extinction.

Eight juvenile whooping cranes started the 750-mile migration to wintering grounds at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in southern New Mexico. All eight whoopers were banded, and five had the radio transmitters, developed especially for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, attached to their bands. Each bird was tagged in a unique color code for quick identification.

The young Grays Lake whoopers are the products of a "cross-fostering" experiment begun in 1975 wherein whooping crane eggs are placed under nesting sandhill cranes who serve as surrogate parents for the surviving chicks. The purpose of the Grays Lake project is to establish a new migratory flock to strengthen the species' chances of survival in the wild. Fertilized eggs for the Grays Lake experiment come from the wild migratory flock that nests in Canada's Wood Buffalo Park and from a captive flock at the Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. The young whooper tracked by air is the first offspring of the Patuxent flock to survive to fall migration.

-more-

"Ray" was the first of the birds carrying transmitters to begin migration. En route from Idaho to New Mexico, members of the flock stopped over to rest and feed in Colorado's San Luis Valley at the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge. The young whooper was tracked 498 miles from Grays Lake to Monte Vista by Service and National Audubon Society representatives. The Audubon Society, which has long been involved in whooping crane conservation efforts, funded half the cost of the tracking expedition.

For the first time, researchers were able to monitor a whooper's precise migration habits. The transmitter/receiving unit operated at a distance of up to 60 miles when both bird and plane were airborne. "Ray" and his foster parents traveled 164 miles the first day in nearly six hours, roosting in a rancher's stock pond in southwest Wyoming. The second day the young whooper traveled 171 miles before landing for an overnight stay in a meadow at Grand Mesa, Colorado. On October 5, "Ray" arrived at Monte Vista after a 163-mile flight.

The flight pattern from Grays Lake to Monte Vista--the first leg of the migration--was remarkably consistent. Each day, the family took flight shortly before noon, logged an average of 166 miles, and came down to roost shortly before sundown. The birds soared at altitudes from 7,500 to over 12,000 feet when crossing the Rockies.

"Ray" and his adoptive parents fed and rested at Monte Vista for 10 days. On October 15, they departed for their final destination, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. The whooper was observed at that refuge early on the morning of October 17.

One of the five young whoopers fitted with a transmitter died October 12, apparently as a result of a golden eagle attack near Rangely, Colorado. While this is the first observed kill of a whooping crane by an eagle, there is documented evidence of occasional attacks on sandhill cranes, which are smaller than their stately white cousins. Such specific knowledge of losses can contribute to overall recovery planning.

Prior to the eagle attack, the Grays Lake flock had a population of 17 whooping cranes. The Wood Buffalo flock, which travels 2,600 miles to winter at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, numbered 73 at the start of migration. Patuxent counts 25 in its captive flock. In 1941, the total whooping crane population numbered only 21 birds.

x

x

x